

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK ROADS & BRIDGES,
CATALOOCHEE TRAIL AND TURNPIKE
(State Route 284)
Between TN-NC State Boundary and Cataloochee
Gatlinburg Vicinity
Sevier County
Tennessee

HAER NO. TN-35-N

HAER
TENN
78-GAT.V
6N-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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Location: Great Smoky Mountains National Park,
North Carolina, between state boundary
and Cataloochee

Date of Construction: ca. 1825 (improvement construction by
NPS, 1930s-60s)

Type of Structure: Roadway, Bridges, and Landscape

Use: National Park Transportation System

Engineer: U.S. Bureau of Public Roads and National
Park Service

Fabricator/Builder: Various private and public contractors

Owner: U.S. Department of the Interior,
National Park Service, Great Smoky
Mountains National Park

Significance: The transportation system of Great Smoky
Mountains National Park is
representative of NPS park road design
and landscape planning throughout the
country. Much of the construction,
including that of the Cataloochee Trail
and Turnpike, was undertaken by the
Civilian Conservation Corps during the
1930s. Once established, this road
system provided access to the first
national park in the southern portion of
the United States as well as links to
the Blue Ridge Parkway and Shenandoah
National Park.

Project Information: Documentation was conducted during the
summer of 1996 under the co-sponsorship
of HABS/HAER, Great Smoky Mountains
National Park, the National Park Service

Roads and Parkway Program and funded through the Federal Lands Highway Program. Measured drawings were produced by Edward Lupyak, field supervisor, Matthew Regnier, Karen Young, and Dorota Sikora (ICOMOS intern, Poland). The historical reports were prepared by Cornelius Maher and Michael Kelleher. See also drawings and histories on related structures: Great Smoky Mountains National Park, TN-35; Newfound Gap Road, TN-35-A; Clingmans Dome Road, TN-35-B; Little River Road, TN-35-C; Cades Cove and Laurel Creek Roads, TN-35-D; Foothills Parkway, TN-35-E; Cataloochee Valley Road, TN-35-F; Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, TN-35-G; Big Creek Road, TN-35-H; Northshore Road, TN-35-I; Cosby Park Road, TN-35-J; Deep Creek Road, TN-35-K; Greenbrier Road, TN-35-L; Heintooga Ridge and Balsam Mountain Roads, TN-35-M; Rich Mountain Road, TN-35-O; Elkmont Road, TN-35-P; Loop Over Bridge, TN-35-Q; Smokemont Bridge, TN-35-R; Elkmont Vehicle Bridge, TN-35-S; and Luten Bridges, TN-35-T.

Introduction

Cataloochee Trail and Turnpike, also known as Route 284, begins on the Tennessee-North Carolina border at the northeast corner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The road travels south along the boundary of the park for approximately 5 miles before entering the park itself north of Mount Sterling Gap. Here, this dirt road climbs steadily to the gap, twisting and turning as it follows the side of a ridge on the west side of the road.

Route 284 reaches Mount Sterling Gap 2.6 miles after entering the park. From here a trailhead takes hikers to the top of Mount Sterling, where an old fire tower constructed by the CCC provides a panoramic view of the Smokies. After passing through the gap, the road begins to descend to the Cataloochee Valley. Here, the road follows the west side of a ridge as it winds its way downward. In areas such as this, Route 284 provides modern motorists with a good example of the old wagon roads which early settlers built through the Smokies in the nineteenth century.

At 4.9 miles, the road meets the Little Cataloochee Trail, an old road which once served part of the settlement in the

Cataloochee Valley. Hiking along this trail, park visitors can visit three homesteads and a church which were preserved by the Park Service in order to interpret the lives of these mountain people.

Around 6.5 miles, Route 284 descends into the bottomlands around Cataloochee Creek, which is the site of what was the largest settlement in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The road crosses to the west side of the creek via a small wood bridge at 6.7 miles. In this area, traces of several old dirt roads are visible, one of which leads to Asbury Crossing, an old ford across the creek which is also still visible. The road crosses to the east side of the creek at 6.9 miles via a metal truss bridge. An old ford is visible next to the bridge. Also located at the bridge is a United States Geological Survey hydrologic stream gauging station which takes scientific readings of Cataloochee Creek, a large drainage protected by the park and relatively untouched by human. Just over the bridge, on the east side of the creek, the trace of an old wagon road leads 0.25 mile to Asbury Crossing.

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A fork in Route 284 is located at 8.5 miles, with one part of the road traveling southwest into Cataloochee Valley, and the other southeast to the park boundary at Cove Creek Gap. The southwest section crosses to the west side of Cataloochee Creek 0.8 miles after the fork via a metal truss bridge. Here, the road travels south along the side of the creek, for 1.1 miles. At this point the thick vegetation growing in close to the sides of the road opens up to a field, which recreates the agricultural appearance of the area in Cataloochee Valley. The Palmer place, a restored farmhouse and outbuildings is one of the major interpretive exhibits in the valley, located on the side of the road at 1.3 miles. The trace of an old road is visible behind the house. The southwest fork of Route 284 reaches the east-west Cataloochee Valley Road, the main road through this section of the park, 1.8 miles after the fork.

From the fork in Route 284, the southeast section of the road climbs toward Cove Creek Gap, meeting the eastern side of the Cataloochee Valley Road at 2.1 miles. From here, Route 284 continues to the park boundary, twisting and turning its way

around blind turns as it ascends to Cove Creek Gap, located at 3.9 miles after the fork in the road.

The Cataloochee Trail and Turnpike

Long before white settlers arrived in the Cataloochee Valley, Indians traveled across this part of the Great Smoky Mountains. In the Cataloochee area, the Cherokee used the so-called Cataloochee Trail, which connected the area around present-day Cosby, Tennessee with Cove Creek Gap in North Carolina. A branch of this footpath followed Cataloochee Creek into the Cataloochee Valley.¹

After whites began settling in the region in the early nineteenth century, they improved these footpaths to accommodate wagons. Around 1825, residents of Jonathan Creek, North Carolina widened and graded Cataloochee Trail from the Jonathan Creek Valley over the mountains into Cataloochee Valley, calling the road the Cataloochee Turnpike. Rates to take packhorses, cattle, and hogs over the turnpike, and the absence of rates for wagons,

¹ Lambert, "The Pioneer History of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park," 8.

indicated that this was intended to be a "stockdriver's road" to take herd of animals over the mountains.² In 1851, the North Carolina legislature authorized the continuation of the Cataloochee Turnpike through Mount Sterling Gap to the state line with Tennessee at Davenport Gap. This extension of the road was completed in 1860, and followed the route of the Cherokee's Cataloochee Trail.³ The state widened and surfaced the Cataloochee Turnpike around 1930, and the road became North Carolina Route 284.⁴ It was probably around this time that the two metal truss bridges which carry the road over Cataloochee Creek were built to replace two fords.

Route 284

In 1933, the CCC began construction of a road along Big Creek in the northeastern section of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and established a camp along the creek near the

² Givens, "Cataloochee and the Establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park," 44.

³ Ibid, 45-47.

⁴ Inventory and Inspection Report, U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, 1950; Roads Vertical File; GSMNP Library.

park boundary. During the summer of 1933, North Carolina rebuilt 1.5 miles of Route 284 from Davenport Gap on the Tennessee line, south to Mount Sterling Gap, in order to make the camp "accessible."⁵

Although North Carolina Route 284 was owned by the state, the Park Service made plans to improve the road using CCC labor, because sections of the road passed through the newly established Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and it provided the only access for automobiles to the Cataloochee area of the park.⁶ From 1934 through 1938, CCC enrollees were widening the road, surfacing it with crushed rock, and installing "drainage features."⁷ A quarry site was located 0.2 mile west of Cove Creek Gap, near the park boundary, to provide the rock for surfacing.⁸

Surfacing North Carolina Route 284 between the town of Mount Sterling, where the road crossed Big Creek, and Mount Sterling

⁵ Superintendent's Monthly Report, July 1933; GSMNP.

⁶ Superintendent's Monthly Report, January 1934; GSMNP.

⁷ Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1936; GSMNP.

⁸ Superintendent's Monthly Report, July 1939; GSMNP.

Gap, was completed in June 1937.⁹ Work continued toward Cataloochee, and included "widening [the road] at curves and narrow places, [and] sloping the banks where needed."¹⁰ The reconstruction of Route 284 was completed by the CCC in July or August 1938.¹¹

As part of its work on North Carolina Route 284, in May 1935, the CCC completed a parking area and overlook at Davenport Gap, where the Appalachian Trail crossed the road on the border with Tennessee. Contemporary photographs included in the May 1935 Superintendent's Monthly Report show that most of the mountainsides around Davenport Gap were still relatively barren as a result of logging. The CCC's work included the construction of a landscaped parking area with log guardrails and a rustic style masonry retaining wall.¹² Today, the forest has grown back around Davenport Gap and there is no longer a view. In addition, the retaining wall and other features of the parking area have

⁹ Superintendent's Monthly Report, June 1937; GSMNP.

¹⁰ Superintendent's Monthly Report, December 1937; GSMNP.

¹¹ Superintendent's Monthly Report, June 1938; GSMNP.

¹² Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1935; GSMNP.

been removed, although the level area on which it was located is still visible. Information as to when or why the CCC construction was removed is not available. It is possible that as the forest grew and obscured the view, thereby negating the purpose of the overlook, the retaining wall and other features were removed by the Park Service, rather than continuing maintenance of these structures.

Although sections of North Carolina Route 284 ran through the park, and the Park Service maintained parts of the road, it was still considered a state road. At a February 7, 1969, meeting of the North Carolina State Highway Commission, it was decided that with the completion of Interstate 40, which ran along the Pigeon River just east of Route 284, the state no longer needed to maintain jurisdiction over the sections of the road within the park. Therefore, it would abandon Route 284 within the park, thereby turning it over to the federal government, and the sections of the road outside the park would become secondary roads. As a result, the road lost the

designation North Carolina Route 284, and was referred to simply as Route 284.¹³

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Park Service concluded that Route 284 did not provide motorists with adequate access to the Cataloochee area of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and the agency wanted to build a new road from Interstate 40 into the park. With a newer and more modern access road available, the Park Service planned to close most of Route 284, and convert it into a truck trail. However, opposition from the local community to the construction of the new road led the Park Service to cancel its plans, and Route 284 remained the sole road through the east section of the park.

With Route 284 remaining open, the Park Service had to continue maintaining the road. The two metal truss bridges which carry the road over Cataloochee Creek, which the Park Service referred to as being "historic," were reconstructed in 1987 by Payne and Stalcup of Brasstown, North Carolina. This \$324,990 contract was awarded in January, and work probably began in

¹³ Staff Meeting Minutes, February 18, 1969; GSMNP.

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February or March.¹⁴ The lower bridge was completed in
September,¹⁵ and the upper bridge in December.¹⁶

¹⁴ Staff Meeting Minutes, January 27, 1987; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

¹⁵ Staff Meeting Minutes, August 18, 1987; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

¹⁶ Staff Meeting Minutes, December 8, 1981; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

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